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The Strange Case of Henri Curriel

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"BY THE MID-1970S, PRACTICALLY EVERY TERRORIST AND GUERRILLA FORCE TO SPEAK OF WAS REPRESENTED IN FRANCE."

BY CLAIRE STERLING

"Revolutionaries around the world, including terrorists, mourn the assassination of Henri Curriel, leader of a Paris-based support apparatus that funneled money, arms, documents, training and other services to scores of leftist groups." Thus, as if in a trade paper's in-house column of Births, Deaths and Marriages, did the Central Intelligence Agency note the passing of a true craftsman.

Henri Curriel, a gray and fatherly-looking figure in half-rimmed glasses, was shot dead on May 4, 1978, in the elevator of his Left Bank Paris apartment, by two featureless gunmen wearing gloves—the only detail his neighbors noticed. A stateless Egyptian Jew, he had been living in Paris for 27 years. For nearly all that time, he was listed as foreign agent S531916 in the files of the DST, the French internal security service. Every major counterespionage agency in the West had a file on him, and almost anybody in the trade reading through these would assume he worked for the KGB. Nevertheless, he

had a foolproof system for evading arrest. "My dossier is the thickest one in the DST, but they can't do a thing about it," he once remarked, rightly.

Henri Curriel ran something politically chic and vaguely charitable called Aide et Amitié (Help and Friendship). He liked to say that it was meant for people working against "undemocratic countries in the Third World," and he would often confide that the operation was slightly illegal. The added spice of breaking the law just a little bit in a worthy cause made it all the more attractive. A hundred or so young volunteers of various nationalities were on his helpful and friendly team, including Catholic worker-priests and Protestant pastors. A Dominican priory in the Rue de la Glacimere gave him house-room for meetings; a group called France, Terre d'Asile (France, Land of Asylum) gave him hostel facilities just up the street; the Protestant aid mission Cimade gave him the use of its refugee shelter in the suburb of Massy. The foreigners he bedded down for the night, the nocturnal visitors, the couriers to and from distant lands—Africa, South America, the Middle East—attracted little public attention. It was all part of his benevolent if rather indistinct image as a doer of good works.

century. The lid was lifted by Georges Suffert, a respected journalist who spent three months investigating the story he wrote for the weekly *Le Point*. One alluring glimpse from Suffert and the lid was clamped down again, unmistakably from somewhere above.

Two personal stories gave Suffert his lead.

In the summer of 1968, a Parisian woman named Michèle Firk went to Guatemala with a false passport in the name of "Isabelle Chaumet." A member of the French Communist Party for some time, she had evidently chosen a more active life of revolutionary combat. After several weeks in Guatemala, she rented a car there on Aug. 22. The American ambassador was assassinated six days later. Her hired car, used in the attack, led police to the hideout of the Cuban-backed FAR (Armed Revolutionary Force), which claimed credit for the killing. Rather than face interrogation, Michèle Firk committed suicide. Her FAR comrades claimed to know nothing about her, except that she had worked in Paris with an "important" man known as "Julien" or "Raymond."

Seven years later, the South African

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